

How Can Ethical Consumers Be Connected to Collective Political Participation for Social Change?: Examining a consumer cooperative: iCOOP in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

HOW CAN ETHICAL CONSUMERS BE CONNECTED TO COLLECTIVE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

Examining a consumer cooperative: iCOOP in South Korea

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This thesis examines the relationship between consumption and politics. It focuses on how ethical consumption can be positioned to be part of political participation. It also pays attention to how it can serve as a pathway for creating a better society in which ethical, individual consumers are mobilized toward the collective activism and the conventional political participation that influences social change in the context of globalization and individualism. To demonstrate this, the study examines the case of a consumer cooperative: iCOOP in South Korea based on data from in-depth interviews with members of iCOOP. The findings show that ethical consumption practices can be understood in the context of life politics. Participants in this study constantly make attempts to readapt their consuming patterns and choose their lifestyles based on a changed consciousness of the self, the world, and the interrelations between both at the individual level. By extension, participants analyzed as political agents of life politics show that they can become more engaged in collective activism and conventional political participation. What makes this mobilization possible is that they were able to be involved in rehearsal phases for citizens' roles at the collective level, and to gain easy access to social issues and a set

of political tools in iCOOP. It is significant that iCOOP provides a platform for collecting and maintaining the state of this collectivized consumer power by organizing individually scattered consumers. It is not an 'imagined community' for mobilizing scattered consumers, but rather a practical and real community established by consumers themselves in which they try to become aware of interrelations between the self and the world, rearrange their ways of living, and further expand their interests and actions to large-scale social and political issues for making social change. These findings not only support the alternative views of ethical consumption as political participation, these also offer a fresh perspective by showing the process and the mechanism of the connection between consumption and politics. This study ultimately leads to the possibility that ethical consumption can become a vehicle that brings about a meaningful change in both life and conventional politics.

HOW CAN ETHICAL CONSUMERS BE CONNECTED TO COLLECTIVE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

Examining a consumer cooperative, iCOOP in South Korea

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, scholars have engaged in a debate over the relationship between consumption and political participation. Since at least the 1980s, consumers across the country have increasingly used their purchasing power to indicate their political and ethical views in response to social and environmental crises that have arisen in the context of globalization. In many industrialized countries, even ordinary consumers have become concerned about where manufacturers make products, the processes that they use to create and process them and how the purchase and use of products affects their lives, the broader society and the environment. Moreover, they also seek to understand the wider consequences of production, including whether laborers receive fair and just compensation. In the United States, corporate chain stores, such as Whole Foods Market, that offer organic foods are gaining popularity, despite their higher prices. Farmers' markets and cooperative organizations have also developed a growing base of consumer support due to their perceived protection of sustainable agriculture, fair-trade products, and local food systems. In response to the perception of greener consumer tastes, even traditional corporations have begun developing eco-labeling schemes or organic brands, and marketers now also take cognizance of the new reality of a more politicized consumer base.

These trends and tendencies provide an interesting contrast as compared to conventional assumptions about the nature of consumption. Scholars have generally

viewed consumption as an individual and personal action, and in this sense they have not seen it as deeply linked to civics and politics. But, surprisingly, recently ethical consumers' personal purchasing decisions have become more meaningful and complex than have rational economic actions based on material, quality, and price; that is, ethical consumers have expressed their political voice by casting economic votes regarding all matters involved in the terrain of their daily lives. As Shah et al. (2007) indicated, consumers turn to the market as, "a venue to express political and moral concerns" through "the daily practices of ordinary citizens" (p. 219). Consumers try to raise their status to an extensive level of societal and structural context beyond their ordinary everyday consumption.

As this phenomenon has gained steam, debates concerning the deeper political meanings of these consumers' practices have been more actively conducted across the disciplines. Scholars have referred to this new consumer practice that takes into account political or ethical considerations by a number of names: political consumerism (Micheletti 2003; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005), critical consumerism (Sassatelli 2006), conscious consumption (Willis and Schor 2012), sustainable consumption (Southerton, Chappells, and Vliet 2004; Seyfang, 2009), green consumerism (Lockie et al. 2004), or ethical consumption (Shaw and Shiu 2003; Shaw 2007; Carrier 2008; Adams and Raisboroughn 2010).

In this thesis, I prefer to use 'ethical consumption' as a representative term to describe the new kinds of practices that consumers engage in that have political and ethical motivations because ethical consumption has come into the everyday language in a way that moves beyond scholarly discourse. Indeed, the term rightly indicates a level of flexibility that covers more points in common with other terms' meaning (Lewis and Potter 2011, p.4, 5; Littler 2011). Nonetheless, coming up with a clear and

easy definition of 'ethical consumption' presents real challenges. Some scholars point out the difficulties of defining the notion because it might be, "a convenient catch-all phrase for a range of tendencies" rather than "a defined set of practices"(Lewis and Potter 2011, p.4; Littler 2011; Humphery 2009).

Nevertheless, this paper will use one definition of ethical consumption so as to avoid the conceptual confusion. According to Giovanni Orlando (2012), 'ethical consumption' can be defined as, "the purchasing of goods, together with their consumption in complex webs of socio-ecological practices and imaginaries (Goodman and Goodman 2001), imbued with positive values aimed at reducing the economy's harm to humans or the environment" (156). This notion is in line with political consumerism, which refers to consumer purchasing behavior based on political or ethical considerations, or both (Stolle et al 2005, p.246; Michelletti 2003).

The growing literature on the relationship between ethical consumption and political participation explores three outstanding issues. The first issue regards whether consuming based on political and moral reflection rightly falls within the category of political participation. As indicated in the notion, ethical consumption cannot be included within a standard political scheme even though clear evidence exists for consumers to signal their political or social views of the market (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Conventional views see that ethical consumption is mostly conducted within the private realm, and even then gets viewed through the lens of an individual practice. Also, ethical consumption does not target only political institutions.

Littler (2011) summarized the two competing sides of the debate concerning the individualization of ethical consumption and the 'responsibilization' of the individuals (5). On the one hand, he posits that ethical consumption as an

individualistic form offers a means through which neoliberal governments can shift responsibility for confronting the weakened social safety net. On the other hand, he notes that ethical consumption offers an alternative political approach that can make up for the weak points of conventional politics. In this sense, when facing the rise of this phenomenon, scholars need to think about just how they can position ethical consumption in terms of political engagement based on its political character.

This first issue naturally leads to a consideration of the degree to which ethical consumption can be linked in conventional collective forms of political actions. A fair number of scholars express concern about the potential obstacles of ethical consumer action over more conventional collective and political participation. According to this perspective, the individualized ethical consumption “crowds out” conventional collective activism and participation; even further, it serves as anti-mechanism of action for politics (Willis and Schor 2012; Carrier 2008; Johnston 2008; Szasz 2007; Maniates 2002).

Given this paradigm, it makes sense that people will focus upon the inefficacy of ethical consumption in bringing about social change. Indeed, many scholars have looked to this particular question in order to cast doubts on ethical consumption as a significant arena for social change. Even though consumers behave ethically in order to help usher in a better society, if consumer action is apolitical, individual, and crowding out traditional collective politics, it should be obvious that ethical consumption cannot drive social change at all, and that it represents little more than just a specious trap.

Not everyone accepts these pessimistic views of ethical consumption, though. Indeed, alternative views focus upon the link between ethical consumers as citizens and political activism that leads to and contributes to social change. However, the

existing literature tends to overlook the process by which ethical consumption forms a new kind of political participation that can function as a pathway to conventional collective participation for significant social change. Also, such studies tend to emanate mostly in Western societies, with very few studies aimed at Asia despite the fact that ethical consumption is a phenomenon not limited to one specific area.

Therefore, in line with these alternative perspectives, this thesis will address these important questions about the political position and meaning of ethical consumption by showing how ethical consumption can be positioned as part of political participation, and can serve as a pathway to social change toward a better society, particularly with respect to its links to collective activism and conventional forms of political participation. Also, this thesis will examine the case of iCOOP, a consumer cooperative organization in South Korea that operates under the slogan of “ethical consumption.” The case of iCOOP shows that ethical consumption can sometimes serve as part of major structural changes in economic and political systems.

Ultimately, this paper aims to explore the possibility that ethical consumption can become a vehicle that brings about a meaningful change in real politics—both life politics and more conventional politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the scholarly debates about consumption, three strong conventional categories of views have arisen regarding the nature of consumption: individualizing and self-interest, apolitical and un-civic, and incapable of making social change (Willis and Schor 2012).

Even though new consumption practices using the market to express ethical or political consideration represent a relatively new phenomenon in modern society,

our consciousness of ethical consumption does not necessarily follow the pattern of this phenomenon because of the conventional laid out views above. Both the public and scholars have trouble understanding and embracing ethical consumption in terms of political participation. Margaret Willis (2009) explained in detail the basic grounds of the gap between the phenomenon and the consciousness related to ethical consumption in her thesis. As indicated in her study, the solid stereotype of consumption as individualized, apolitical, and ineffective took root and grew out of a historically cultural and theoretical legacy (Willis 2009). The mainstream view in earlier scholarly work, “a productivist bias”, has served as the starting point for establishing the assumption of the nature of consumption (Willis 2009, 4). That is, consumption has been inferior to production, as nothing more than a, “diversion rather than an active or resistive force itself” (Willis 2009, 4; Schudson 2007).

On these grounds, a shared assumption in academic discourse has begun to emerge that consumer practices center on, “individualization, privatization, materialism, and self-interest” under the influence of the neo-liberal notion and capitalism since the Second World War (Barnett et al. 2005, 45). Juliet Schor (2007) in *In Defense of Consumer Critique: Revisiting the Consumption Debates of the Twentieth Century* states that recent works criticize the consumer critic line in the twentieth century in which traditional notable scholars such as Veblen, Adorno and Horkheimer, Galbraith, Baudrillard describe consumers as passive and manipulated. Contrary to the modern views against this form of consumer critique, Schor (2007) makes the argument that critical consumer approaches at the macro level are worthy of attention amidst the hegemonic struggle between consumers and producers. However, this paper takes full cognizance of the existing atmosphere of treating consumers like passive entities in the traditional discourses.

Given this assumption, it is natural that individualized ethical consumers, who only pursue self-interest and do not care about serious common good, cannot have the possibility to overcome the deception of corporations and an unjust market system.

This can cause a downfall of consumers, putting them in the position of becoming vulnerable customers within the market. Along this line, Margaret Willis (2009) expresses the problem with these sorts of assumptions about the nature of consumer by asserting that, “this perspective envisions consumers as inherently lacking political agency in the marketplace” (5). Kate Soper (2004) also insists that the view that looks on consumption as individualized and oriented only toward self-interest limits consumption to the personal realm, and wrongly unmoors it from public, collective, and civic values, saying that, “whether consumers are viewed as ‘free’ but essentially self-interested buyers of goods and services, or as the ‘unfree’ manipulated victims, or as ‘freely’ self-styling ‘constructs’ of the system, in none of these cases are they theorized in their being or aspect as consumers as reflecting and responsible agents assuming accountability to the world beyond their immediate personal concerns” (112).

Contemplation on the nature of individualizing and self-interested consumption still is applied to the ethical arena. A study by Andrew Szasz (2007) sharply reveals that even ethical consuming behavior is based on self-interest. His new book, *Shopping Our Way to Safety*, indicates that ethical consumption is a mere glorified practice of “inverted quarantine” through which consumers can guard themselves from environmental hazards (4). His writing shows obviously that even ‘buying green’ is conducted by ‘self’-interest and ‘self’-protection rather than ‘our’ community goal.

This individualizing ethical consumption issue is closely linked to the ‘individualization of responsibility’ that connects to the overall crisis of our times. Alongside the prevalence of neoliberalism and capitalism, in developed countries, states and corporations indeed tend to encourage consumers to be responsible for addressing serious hazards. The issue of the individualization of ethical consumption requires attention because ethical consumption based on the individualization of responsibility might block the way toward collective political action capable of bringing about social change.

In this way, Fahlquist (2009) even problematizes the notion of ‘ethical consumer’ by itself because it connotes that an ethical consumer has “full individual responsibility for the environment,” and if consumers do not conduct themselves ethically, they deserve blame (115). George Monbiot (2007b) criticizes that many recent works suggest frothy and incapable “eco-junk” of the individualized solution in response to climate change. Michael Maniates (2002) also pointed out that, “the individualization of responsibility” (33) keeps consumers from deliberating collective solutions through institution, state, or politics, and this response is, “narrowing, in dangerous ways, our ‘environmental imagination’ and undermining our capacity to react effectively to environmental threats to human well-being” (34).

Littler (2011) diagnoses this ‘responsibilization’ of the individual consumer as a representative of a cross-section of ‘individualistic’ society, stating that, “ethical consumption is a symptom of a profoundly individualistic society in which individuals are being presented with both the opportunity of and responsibility for tackling a number of deep-rooted social problems - poverty, exploitation, mass industrialization, pollution - through their purchasing decisions in a world in which we are encouraged to ‘shop for change’” (33).

For critics, ethical consumption as the apolitical and individualized represents a practice far removed from the value of harmonization and collectiveness that must exist at the base of civic and political engagement, and it is restraining and even detrimental, to make social change.

In this sense, it is not surprising that there is a severe division in recognizing the roles of consumers and citizen. The public and academic discourse tends to distinguish sharply between consumers and citizens. People generally assume that citizens pursue community values with their public mind while consumers act out of self-interest based upon their predilection for stressing individual choice (Schudson 2007; Bevir and Trentmann 2007). This separation serves as a barrier that prevents us from grasping the social and political implications of ethical consumption in the socio-cultural context of social injustice and environmental degradation. Insofar as consumers remain within the private space and practice, social change through the market is completely out of the question.

On the other hand, advocates of ethical consumption come to different opinions and emphasize different solutions to social injustice and ecological problems as compared to their critics. Interestingly, in line with the idea of critics, advocates also do not deny the fact that consumption is an individual practice.

However, they put the focus on the civic and political potential of ethical consumption as not only an individual action, but also a social undertaking (Littler 2011; Nava 1992). On top of that, the proponents of ethical consumption point to many historical examples showing the political influence of ethical consumption in a way that the mainstream approach through existing politics cannot reach. Perhaps the most famous such example of ethical consumption occurred during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the United States. Though people typically see this as a social

movement designed to ignite a civil rights crusade against racial injustice, it also took place within the paradigm of an ethical consumer boycott. The other recent case involved consumers boycotting Nestle in the 1970's because of the unethical production and promotion strategy of breast milk substitutes that might have resulted in the suffering and even death of babies. As remembered in our history, these consumer behaviors directly changed the states and the corporation practice.

Based on these historical cases, Michele Micheletti (2003), who definitely respects the political function of alternative ethical consumption, argues that, “political consumerism carves out new arenas for political action by its involvement in the market and the politics of private corporations. It gives citizens a political voice by allowing them to participate in politics in new and different ways” (15). It seems to mean that consumers brought their own public roles into the everyday life to make influence on society.

In this view, Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) attempt to explain why ethical consumerism should be included within the category of political engagement by conducting a survey with a cross-national student sample. According to their findings, ethical consumption offers a consistent pattern and is measurable based on political motivation; likewise the traditional political action (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). This work also reveals why consumers come to employ the market as an alternative political tool. Consumers feel partly disappointed by the inefficacy of the existing political approach that emphasizes working through the government and institutions, so they then select a new arena of the market to change the irrationalities of the society (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Nava (1992) also resists the notion that political consumerism is an effective enough political approach as to say that it is a “very immediate democratic process” (168).

On the other hand, such new forms of political participation, including ethical consumption, can fall within the category of life politics, sometimes referred to as lifestyle politics. The difference between life politics and conventional forms of participation stems from the fact that life politics, “appears to be more individualized in nature, although it may be embedded in collective societal and political values more generally, and is closely related to everyday activities and lifestyle politics” (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005, 263). Giddens (1991) also asserts that individuals try to address modern societal and political issues with the reflexive modernity in a modern global context, which can be called self-actualization, defining the life politics as follows:

While emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances, life politics is a politics of lifestyle. Life politics is the politics of a reflexively mobilized order - the system of late modernity - which, on an individual and collective level, has radically altered the existential parameters of social activity. It is a politics of self-actualization in a reflexively ordered environment, where that reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope.....Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies (214).

Some scholars account for the emergence of life politics by taking a step further and creating and classifying the characteristics of new forms of political participation, focusing upon the less structural networks-oriented, individual and lifestyle-based, spontaneously mobilized aspects (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Stolle and Hooghe 2004; Bennett 1998). These features vary greatly from the conventional forms of political participation which tend to target the states and the institutions and tend to be conducted in the political realm based on more inflexible, regular, and formal structures (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Bennett 1998). The alternative perspectives of ethical consumption require us to expand the scope and the notion of civic and political participation.

Even if one concedes that ethical consumption serves as an important aspect of life politics, a new form of political participation, another important issue still lingers: what is the relationship between ethical consumption as life politics and the conventional forms of political participation. Even if we accept the idea of ethical consumption as a new form of political engagement, as Michele Micheletti (2003) indicates in his book, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, there still remains the unsolved question of whether, “shopping has the potential to replace more established forms of political participation and turn citizens into consumers,” and a prospect that she believes, “should not be taken lightly” (71). Therefore, the present debate among the proponents of ethical consumption as a new form of political participation is pertinent to identifying the relationship between the new forms of political participation and the old forms of political participation.

Barnett et al. (2005) investigates the meaning of ethical consumerism in the United Kingdom. According to their findings, organizations encourage ordinary consumers to participate in consumer-oriented activism through ethical consumption; namely, ethical consumers serve as a pathway to collective political projects (Barnett et al. 2005). Holzer (2006) also illustrates how the individual choices of ethical consumers can be ‘collectivized,’ appearing as a form of collective political action, and signaled to producers through role mobilization set by organizations and social movements (406). On the other hand, Willis and Schor (2012) conducted the first large-scale empirical research study of this topic in the United States, and found that American ethical consumers simultaneously engage in both formal and informal activism. According to studies with alternative perspectives, ethical consumption is positively related to or inspires political collective activism.

However, research made in the early stages of our understanding of this issue

cannot help but focus on the relationship between ethical consumption and political participation itself. Moreover, the need to examine and report on the mechanisms of how ethical consumption can be linked to collective activism and conventional forms of political participation still remains. As Willis indicates, (2009) “without institutional or policy change, changes in individual practices may not really be able to have an impact given that individual practices themselves become constrained by the institutional and policy structures.” (2) Thus, the way to obtain effective solutions to mobilize general consumers into political collective participation may be by understanding the mechanisms or processes of how ethical consumption leads to collective forms of political engagement.

On the other hand, researchers have to date focused most of their studies in Western societies such as Europe, Canada and the United States (Willis and Schor 2012; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Barnett et al 2005; Micheletti 2003). However, there remains an important lacuna with respect to the relationship between ethical consumption and political participation in Asia, even though the problem of environmental degradation and social injustice caused by the globalization has extended beyond a handful of Western countries, and ethical consumption has become a more common battle cry across the globe.

The existing work on ethical consumption and political participation cannot yet confirm the relationship, nor does it yield a comprehensive understanding of the various contexts across the globe.

In this context, this thesis makes attempt to explore explored what remains unsettled regarding the relationship between ethical consumption and political participation by taking a serious look at voices of members of iCOOP, an ethical consumer cooperative in South Korea.

BACKGROUND OF iCOOP CONSUMER COOPERATIVE

iCOOP Korea began in 1998 as an organization comprised of six local cooperatives in Seoul. The organization's title indicates that, "the four 'I's stand for 'Individuals' promoting the 'Ideals' of sharing and cooperation, while never losing sight of our original 'Innocence' and practicing 'Innovation', all as consumer co-operatives." To this end, the title reflects the founders' visions and goal.

The core value and the slogan of iCOOP Korea is, 'ethical consumerism: a most beautiful practice.' iCOOP Korea defines ethical consumerism as part of a duty to have, 'respect for people and labor, to protect agriculture and the environment, and to ensure food safety.' That is to say, iCOOP Korea aims at establishing a better society in which urban consumers and rural producers harmonize their actions in response to ecological threats.

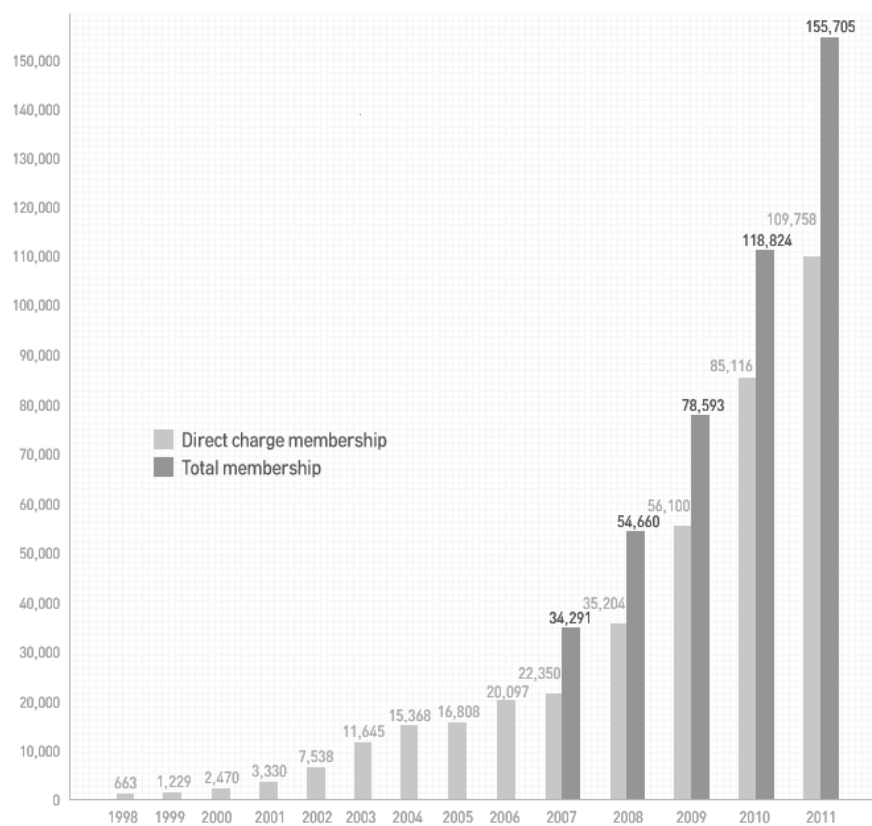
In 2008, iCOOP Korea became a member of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) so that their campaigns of ethical consumerism can be realized in everyday life together with the standard values and principles of consumer co-operatives.

Understanding that ethical consumerism must have its foundation in ethical production, iCOOP Korea launched a purchase and supply business aimed at helping to facilitate ethical production and consumption. Now, iCOOP Korea has managed to establish a safe foods system in local communities, and it also runs the Natural/Dream Foods and Bakery brand. These activities have allowed them to provide ethical meals for school lunches and have also built an ethical production infrastructure that produces organic foods.

Its membership represents the current status of the organization. As of 2011, the total membership is 155,705 persons, and direct charge membership is 109,758

persons. Here, direct charge membership means persons who registered as regular members and pay a monthly membership fee. Indirect membership refers to general consumers using products produced or distributed from iCOOP Korea. The number of member local cooperatives is 75, and the number of Natural/Dream Store is 115 in South Korea.

[Figure 1] Membership Increase



RESEARCH METHODS

This thesis is based on qualitative interviews regarding the thoughts, attitudes, meaning of ethical consumption, political participation, the relationship between both, and general social justice including environment, climate change, labor rights, poverty, and social welfare. The first respondent was recruited through advertisements posted

on several popular universities' web communities. Then, additional respondents came as recommendations from previous respondents through a snowballing interview technique (Babbie 2001). In all, eighteen total respondents participated in this study: eight core leaders, seven consumer activists, and three general members in iCOOP. The interviews were conducted in August and November of 2011 in South Korea. Respondents were offered a gift beverages or a gift voucher for a movie or a book worth ten dollars. The interviews were semi-structured based on prepared key questions, and lasted from about 1 hour to 1.5 hour. For the effective analysis, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The results of interviews were analyzed using the atlas.ti software package. The basic information of respondents is as follows. All names of respondents are pseudonyms in this thesis.

[Table 1] Basic Information of Interview Participants

No.	Name	Position	gender	Period	Education
1	B. Park	Activist	Female	3 years	Bachelor's degree
2	C. Song	Activist	Female	7 years	Master's degree
3	D. Kim	Activist	Female	7 years	Bachelor's degree
4	E. Kim	Activist	Female	3 years	Master's degree
5	J. Ju	Activist	Female	4 years	Bachelor's degree
6	F. Lee	Activist	Female	9 years	Bachelor's degree
7	G. Oh	Activist	Female	7 years	Bachelor's degree
8	A. Jo	Member	Female	3 years	High school diploma
9	Z. Kim	Member	Female	7 years	Bachelor's degree
10	P. Yoon	Member	Female	10 years	Bachelor's degree
11	Q. Shin	Core leader	Male	14 years	High school diploma (dropped out of university)

12	R. Oh	Core leader	Male	14 years	High school diploma (dropped out of university)
13	S. Jung	Core leader	Male	14 years	Bachelor's degree
14	T. Park	Core leader	Female	14 years	Bachelor's degree
15	O. Shin	Core leader	Male	14 years	Bachelor's degree
16	U. Park	Core leader	Female	14 years	High school diploma
17	Y. Jin	Core leader	Female	14 years	Bachelor's degree
18	H. Shin	Core leader	Female	14 years	Middle school diploma

RESULTS

Embracing Ethical Consumption as Political Participation in Terms of Life

Politics

David Easton (1953) asserts that, “political life concerns all those varieties of activity that influence significantly the kind of authoritative policy adopted for a society and the way it is put into practice” (128). As such, politics implicates all human activities related to “authoritative allocation of values in society” (Easton 1965, 21). Verba et al. (1995) also note that political participation is “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action-either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (38).

These definitions can serve as guides for an examination of the question of whether ethical consumption rightly falls within the scope of political participation. In order to identify ethical consumers as political agents, one must understand how consumers’ intent or motivation, the corresponding practice itself, and the meaning of the practice of ethical consumers can be formed and balanced in terms of political action.

Ethical consuming behavior is a visual activity, and as such one can more easily evaluate whether some specific practice falls within the gamete of ethical consumption in terms of the conditions of the practice itself. For example, although consuming fair trade products might look like an ethical consuming practice, we cannot easily say that the person undertaking this action falls within the definition of a political actor because we do not know their real intent nor the purpose of their consuming practice. What is much more important here is how individuals recognize their ethical consumption practice in regard to their political participation. Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) state that in order to consider an ethical consumer a political actor, one must first identify the political motivation, constancy, and coherence of the behavior.

Answering questions about political motivation and intent, constancy, and coherence of the behavior will likely require examining a process of how one acts as an ethical consumer. This section will examine how interview participants devote themselves to ethical consumption. Although participants do, of course, fit within the structure of a real community, this study will focus on the individual level.

Through analysis of the interviews, this thesis discovered two distinguished tendencies of the core leaders group and of the general members group with respect to certain aspects of political intent and objectives related to the process of being ethical consumers. Here, core leaders refer to those people involved in establishing iCOOP or who are currently in a position of executive authority such as the CEO, representatives of local cooperatives, or the Secretary General. General members include ordinary people who joined in local cooperatives of iCOOP as well as people who became consumer activists with the willingness to take charge of an activist undertaking.

First, let us look at the case of core leaders. One must begin by understanding why core leaders chose the arena of ethical consumption and what led them to establish the consumer cooperative iCOOP. Most core leaders belonged to the so-called 386 Generation in South Korea. The term ‘386 Generation’ came about in the late 1990’s, and indicates a “trigenerian (in one’s 30’s), studying in college during the ‘80s, and being born in 1960’s” (Sindonga, 2003). This period marked a time of widespread and broadly based strife and resistance in favor of a movement for democracy. The 386 Generation played a leading role during this era. However, the precise age of people within this group remains flexible, and the term ‘386 Generation’ has come to encompass those people who have experienced and led democratic civil society movements during the 1980’s in South Korea (Lee, 2007).

The Korean civil social movement -based on the 386 Generation, aimed to generate social change. Supporters of the movement believed in a just society that guarantees the rights of common people. The basic ideology of the movement was socialism, and the movement took a stand against the centralist power of the state and the supremacy of the market. Most core leaders in iCOOP had previous involvement in social movements, particularly the labor movement. Activists even tried to institutionalize the labor movement through involvement in party politics.

On the other hand, participating in the social movement meant giving up aspects of a normal life, such as getting a job or having a comfortable life with a family. By joining the labor movement, core leaders expressed a willingness to remain outside of mainstream society. For example, they often dropped out of college, went to jail, or took factory work so as to encourage workers to join in the movement. They did not care about their own private life. As some of the leaders note:

As a result of my involvement in the student movement, I quit school during my senior year, was sent to jail and then dedicated myself to the labor movement. I

might be almost in the last generation with regards to the labor movement's history (Q. Shin, core leader).

There was an atmosphere at that time around 1987 or 1988 when it was quite natural for college students—irrespective of whether they came from Seoul or the provincial areas—to gather and form circles in order to study social sciences. It was a period in which most students in nationwide universities attempted to combine their activist direction with the labor movement or the agricultural movement (T. Park, core leader).

Amidst the student activism endeavoring with a great deal of effort to change the society into one that fit into the socialism-conceptual world, there was a wide spectrum of philosophic ideas and thoughts. Among them was an idea focused on the sector of labor from which clues had to be sought to reform the society. That's why I cast myself to be a factory worker in an attempt to organize a labor union and hold strikes when necessary. Since my entering into the field around 1985, there was a pro-democratic resistance movement on June 10th just prior to a massive labor protest in July and August of 1987 (R. Oh, core leader).

In line with participants' retrospection, an article in *Pressian*, a South Korean journal, describes the student activists participating in the civil movement at that time, stating that “student activists, facing off against the military dictatorship, elected to select the people and society instead of their prospective future. They abandoned their individual interests” (Kim 2010).

Thanks to the activists, including participants in this study who endured individual hardship, this movement effected clear social change. These changes include the improved status of laborers and the birth of a Korean middle class. The continual labor movement enabled laborers to obtain fair compensation. As laborer activists continually pressured company owners, the capitalists raised wages for laborers and improved the working environment. At the same time, the capitalists' concessions generated a middle class, which was new in South Korea. They were consumers who demanded safe and high-quality foods, in addition to showing interest in the environmental crisis. The movement brought together the social justice ideals of activists and the needs of middle class consumers.

Nevertheless, core leaders who participated in this civil and labor social

movement experienced a setback. Political trials failed to establish party politics and assist in the electing of representatives who upheld their beliefs. Simultaneously, leaders watched the fall of the Soviet Union, a symbol of a socialist state. Many of them believed their efforts failed because they lacked citizens' support and were not involved in the lives of everyday people. As R. Oh, a core leader points out:

At the time, people saw socialism's failures. Until the 1990s, people thought that they needed to create a new world after capitalism, in which the owners would be laborers and farmers. They dreamed of a kind of revolution. I had been committed to this vision for seven years in college. However, the dream collapsed. At that time, the so-called Peoples' Party failed to enter institutional politics. Socialist society, even if its ideas are right, could not help but fail because of the gap that existed between it and the public, which did not support it. Of course, the labor movement is always a timeless, valuable, and worthy action, but it has many gaps. So I realized that I'd better do something else worth mentioning, like pursuing economic activities. Given this experience, I believe that social change cannot occur if activists do not achieve real changes in public and everyday life. A mass movement with only an ideology can only fail (R. Oh, core leader).

In regard to the Korean civil movement, Eunhee Lee (2007) makes comments as follows:

However, was it due to resistance against the centralized authoritarian ruling for a long period of time? The civic movement had fallen adrift and come on hard times, facing the very radical and realistic criticism that its structure was similar to the structure of the centralized authoritarian, and it was 'civil movement without citizens'...the civic movement has been required to transform its conventional paradigm in such a way that citizens who lead everyday lives play a role in the civil movement, rather than activists and organizations (232-233).

The core leaders' comments are also in line with Eunhee Lee (2003)'s statement regarding the incapacity of the conventional civil movement at that time. The conventional civil movement would prove ineffective if it could not combine both the public and the everyday aspects of life. Moreover, leaders could not support themselves, and they realized that holding political trials only through conventional political participation could not bring about personal happiness or the public progress that they sought. Y. Jin, a core leader explains that:

The movement throughout the life? While thinking over the possibilities for the progress of the movement which could make throughout its life span, we often considered consumer cooperatives as a tool for the living movement. The mindset

we had in our twenties was.... that the movement was not related to our everyday lives, which meant that we were just verbally talking about the living movement. When viewed from a series of discussions and thoughts, we saw that there was a clear reason why the movement was not effective. It demonstrates that a handful of activists in any movement, no matter how zealous they are, cannot accomplish the fundamental change as directed by the movement (Y. Jin, core leader).

R. Oh, another core leader adds, “I agree that the truest sense of social reform will occur only in so far as to induce real change within the lives of people, as well as ideological change.”

Because of the failure of the political institutionalization of the civil movement, lots of activists joining in civil movements felt broken down, but some people tried to find new alternative ways to realize their vision, particularly the core leaders. They took turns pursuing an essential vision related to matters such as social justice and a sustainable society, rather than focusing on radical social reform. The peculiar thing about their perceptions of core leaders was that the movement shifted to a focus on legal activity instead of on struggle. Also, core leaders felt the necessity to support themselves rather than focusing on only the movement.

Given the demands of the new times, core leaders chose the frame of the consumer cooperative in order to realize the value of social justice and to satisfy the needs of middle class consumers by operating both businesses and social movements. This allowed them to earn a living while continuing to make commitments to the social movement. Most of all, the important point is that the sphere of consumption is very close to everyday people’s lives, which enabled movement leaders to share their vision with the public, who can then in turn support them. R. Oh explains that:

It was surprising to see that no support existed when an election for the Peoples’ Party was held, and this made me think more about the nature of the relationship between mass movement and the people, particularly with respect to the consumers’ cooperative movement. The frame of the consumers’ cooperative movement lies in extracting changes in how people live their lives and also in helping people move beyond mere ideological theories for changing the world. This is actually realizable as the CCM is directly connected with the public—by the name of association members—and is capable of stirring up the society as intended. Furthermore, the

consumers' cooperative movement can construct an economic foundation via economic activities among the public to the extent that these days some civic organizations are requesting sponsorships (R.Oh, core leader).

Q. Shin adds that:

The labor movement we have held by far laid a great deal of emphasis on production of site-specific activities, but now we come to think that the consumer-specific movement might be put into actual practice by allowing the general merchandise user to easily take part in the process (Q.Shin, core leader).

The arena of ethical consumption is specifically in accord with their vision and values of social justice and also in line with their views of an environmentally sustainable society realized through collaboration. In their view, the value embedded in ethical consumption practice is primarily in opposition to the existing market practice under capitalism and neoliberalism. Through the worth of ethical consumption, core leaders would like to transform institutional and market practices, and ultimately create a base for the birth of the new principal agents to develop these values, which can overcome the negative effects of the existing ideologies. R. Oh believes that:

Ethical consumption arises from the kind of transaction that does not generate unfair profit or impose one-sided sacrifices. Such ethical consumption primarily requires ethical production. In this regard, iCOOP defined the scope of ethical production along with the scope of ethical consumption. Let us take an example that rice cake is made by and for the iCOOP members with the use of rice produced through organic farming in consideration of the environment, where laborers making rice cake shall be protected for their human rights in any manner, to ensure that a chain of ethical production and ethical consumption be safeguarded (R. Oh, core leader).

Building on this point, Q. Shin notes that:

When capitalism began at the end of the Middle Ages, the bourgeoisie emerged...Capitalism has evolved and undergone tremendous changes...there needs to be some awakening of civic society. I am talking about a new economic and political system that allows for or makes possible sustainable societies amongst which people can take each other into consideration. Although vague to specify, it is anyway my goal to formulate power in such a way that groups of people realize it (Q. Shin, core leader).

Finally, S. Jung also speaks to the question of capitalism and explained that:

Capitalism is too abusive...and it is getting worse in a way that has bad effects on a number of people...I was very focused on an alternative economy. The third relates, as pointed out before, to a methodology allowing not only for the provision of alternatives but also for the spread of democracy in our lives, in which I dare to say the consumer cooperative acts as a considerably effective one (S. Jung, core leader).

At the same time, ethical consumption has served as ‘a survival strategy’ for core leaders of iCOOP because large conglomerates did not care about ethical consumption in the initial stages of establishing iCOOP. In recounting this history, S. Jung, a core leader, recalls that:

The reason why we have concentrated on eco-friendly agricultural products is a survival tactic because we were not yet capable of handling general products other than farming products amid fierce competitioncirculating capital by big companies has already grasped all goods sectors except eco-friendly agriculture. Frankly, the sector of eco-friendly agricultural products has been ‘a blue ocean’ (uncontested market), being still effective at this moment (S. Jung, core leader).

In summary, core leaders have turned to the new path of ethical consumer cooperatives even though they are already fully involved with conventional political participation. They have used these tactics to realize their political vision and change the existing system of society with respect to social justice and environmental sustainability. This is because they realized that conventional political participation alone could not accomplish their political vision. Alongside changes at the level of institutional politics, there should also be changes of practices with the public in terms of everyday life. For them, a consumer cooperative is an effective frame that enables them to deliver their values, and ethical consumption is the very manifestation of practical values that they want to realize in everyday life. These frames and contents make core leaders with the public take a step forward toward their ultimate vision.

With regard to being ethical consumers, general members show a distinctly different process compared to the case of core leaders. Regardless of whether general members have a political interest or not, most general members interviewed for this study said that their direct reason for entering into iCOOP was ‘selfish motives’ (G.

Oh), such as their self-interest and the well-being of their family. For example, general members wanted to cure their children's atopic disease (C. Song, P. Yoon, F. Lee, and A. Jo) or wanted to improve the well-being of their family (E. Kim, Z. Kim, and G. Oh). In recounting her reason for joining, A. Jo explains that:

As for me, my child suffered from an atopic dermatitis, so I had to look for safe foodstuff, and discovering iCOOP allowed me to satisfy this need. That's why I joined iCOOP: for the purposes of ethical consumption and safe foodstuff. (A. Jo, general member)

However, over time, general members came to have a true sense of being ethical consumers and also saw themselves as citizens who care about the environment, producers, labor, and even politics in a way that goes beyond self-interest and well-being.

There are three dimensions that allow general members to transform from ordinary consumers to those who become ethical consumers as political agents. The first dimension is related to a process of vitalization of consciousness toward being a critical agent, not as a passive follower who conforms to the institutional orders without any critical thoughts. According to general member-participant interviews, there are various devices to make them capable of interpreting society and seeing the world with critical perspectives. These devices are 'town-gathering', 'lectures for being citizens', and 'visiting production regions' each of which have different effects and functions on consumers.

A 'town-gathering' is a monthly meeting based in town. One member serves as a host and provides their house for a gathering of members who live in the town. Interview participants said that in a town-gathering, members engage in free debate without formality and constraint on topics that range from tips for good housekeeping and upbringing to social and public issues. In particular, they discuss and share the policies and products of iCOOP, plan events that members in the town want to hold,

and eventually create a community worth living in. Compared to ‘town-gathering’ based on distance, ‘club activity’ is based on the interests, hobbies, agendas or work of members (iCOOP 2008). According to the introductory book published at iCOOP (2008), club activity is open the public and there are various clubs in iCOOP; clubs for parents for school lunches, the environment, languages, and so on.

Through these meetings, the members come to open their minds to new perspectives and ideas through discussions with others and the sharing of thoughts. This process of getting to know new kinds of people allows them to interact with similar but different neighbors, as well as help to develop an understanding of certain aspects of institutional orders in our society and the world. E. Kim points out that:

I was pleasantly surprised during community meetings that there are so many people who think about the neighborhood, the environment encircling us and the globe, and who do not merely act as ordinary consumers. What I’d very much like to point out is that I got in touch with such precious people during our activities...They also provide me with a feeling of relief and allow me to understand that I am not the only person to use those products. (E. Kim, general member)

Opening regularly and sometimes irregularly, ‘lectures for being a citizen’ contributes more to professional knowledge about social and political issues. Interview participants said that they began to readjust their consciousness and develop a critical perspective about their practice and the contradictions related to the environment and society. J. Ju notes that:

There are programs in which lectures are presented that target the public, being organized by iCOOP. Those lectures usually presented by left-leaning speakers might be beneficial and as a result of them I am driven to have progressive tendencies. (J. Ju, consumer activist)

As indicated above, interactions with others and education about the public issues awaked them and allowed interview participants to transcend their passive and self-centered consciousness. These moments also offered possibilities for people to become aware of the problems related to their practices and of organizational

contradiction as a critical factor. R. Oh elaborates on this point, saying:

I previously had no interest in justice and had not totally thought about what justice meant, but at this moment I began thinking about it as well as about similar matters, and I certainly began thinking about the degree to which the world works properly or not. The shift of my thinking from a position of bystander to a position of near-to-participant is attributable to my joining with the iCOOP. It is the iCOOP that draws me up to the participatory world (R. Oh, consumer activist)

B. Park adds to this sentiment, noting that:

Few deny that, in the case of my country, large companies are positioned to suppress small manufacturers particularly with respect to the distribution sector. Though they pretend to offer price competitiveness for consumers by taking advantage of blood-sucking mechanisms, we know they have never gone behind. One reason that we have to use eco-friendly products is to deviate from such deceptive and exploiting loop by large size companies (B. Park, consumer activist)

These devices also foster solidarity and community-minded consciousness based on mutual trust, which can be referred to as a prerequisite sentiment for citizens. This is related to the process of people recognizing themselves as members of society. Most participants, regardless of their position - core leaders, consumer activists, or general members – referred to the fact that iCOOP provides, first and foremost, trust in each other, which can be the driven force for “ ‘leap(ing) into faith’ which practical engagement demands” (Giddens 1991, 3).

According to the interviews, in addition to communication within consumers, consumer members have opportunities to interact with producers and farmers. For example, consumers can visit areas of production, meet farmers and producers, and talk with them. Through these interactions, interview participants were able to watch the reality of farming and the hard work of farmers and producers. In this way, interview participants could face others in different situations, and establish trust in them.

Mr. Oh, a core leader, introduced an interesting episode in which lots of rain used to evoke the romantic ideals of the past, but now the heavy rain brings about

uneasiness. Heavy rain now raises concern about the farm produce of farmers. R. Oh conveys the story:

I heard an interesting story from a certain member saying, “I thought it was romantic when it rained. But the thought disappeared when I visited a production site. When it rains heavily, my first thought is now about how much the farmers are worried about the situation.” She was just invited to a cooking event where the safety of local agricultural foodstuffs was demonstrated and a production site where she just saw faces of farmers for the first time in her life. One member reported that she now thought about African people when eating chocolate given to her by the iCOOP. These are just examples of how people begin to view ethical consumption (R. Oh, core leader).

Ms. Park also described the effort of the organization’s effort to get members to act considerately toward one another. Whenever there are unpopular products, leaders notice the situation and signal members to purchase those unpopular products so that producers and farmers can continually yield their products and support themselves. B. Park points out that:

It is quite natural for us to have to consume products to ensure sustainable production. There are less salable stocks we have at all times. We from time to time notify consumers so that farmers focus only on their work. Moreover, we recognize that some amount of defective products is unavoidable given the fact that most suppliers are petty peasants. In these cases, though not so frequently, we try to consume them by ourselves within iCOOP, while letting producers know the details of out-of-grade products. This is because we have to consume their products so as not to worsen their subsistence farming. (B. Park, consumer activist)

This shared community consciousness leads each individual consumer member to recognize who their neighbors are, to care about others, and to rethink their role as a member in their organization. Mr. Oh, a core leader, described that this solidarity can lead to ‘restoration of relationship’ with family, neighbors, others, and nature, which are the bases of the further relationships within society between production and consumption, cities and suburbs, and nation and nation. Then, participants in this study learn to think beyond dichotomized mindset that pits consumers against producers, cities against suburbs, or people against others. Instead, they foster a culture of respect for each other, emphasizing collaborative and

collective ties.

This solidarity formed within iCOOP is eventually expended within society and the world. It affords consumers an important citizenship role within society and the world. They acknowledged that individuals, as members in society, are very organically connected to one another, and if one does a wrong practice in society, such as throwing trash anywhere, the one should ultimately take the risk caused by the practice. For them, protecting only-their own space is not a sufficient form of self-protection. Z. Kim elaborates that:

People come to think of their deeds as something to be eventually returned back in the long run. For example, if one wastes detergent for its sake, washed water later comes back in the form of tap water. All things in this world behave in this way, e.g. agricultural chemicals, air-conditioning refrigerants, etc. Indulgence in immediate comfort will give rise to harder surroundings for our next generations. (Z. Kim, consumer activist)

A critical mind allows members to diagnose contradictions and social ills, and the process of recognizing their role in society based on trust and solidarity prepares people to take responsibility for problems in society. In addition to the previous processes, a final dimension is related to a process of being a citizen practitioner who acts upon the ethical values present in their living territory. They came to implement ethical consumption practices with a changed consciousness, and then were able to hold this consumption behavior beyond their self-interests and their family-centered mind.

This changed ethical consumption practice is different from the previous ethical choices they made before entering into iCOOP in terms of consistency, coherence, and the meaning. In detail, participants' ethical consuming practice does not happen from time to time. They try to continue their 'right' consuming practice. While some members who are motivated only by self-interest or the health of children tend to leave iCOOP when their children grow up (and thus do not need to worry

about the safety of their children's food) or their needs were attained, participants in this study have stayed at iCOOP, and continue to consume ethically. F. Lee, a consumer activist explains this transformed ethic and commitment, stating that:

Moms at an age similar to me normally have children who are in high schools and/or universities, but they are not enrolled as members of iCOOP any more: even though they were once enrolled, it is hard to maintain their membership despite the fact that they are agreeable upon the enrollment (F. Lee, consumer activist)

Moreover, there is a change in the consuming pattern related to the kinds of products and spaces. In the past, participants used to show interest in buying green products. They did not care about their shopping location: it could be a large chain market, small traditional market, or a cooperative. However, now they strive to buy ethical products at their cooperative and sometimes use traditional markets to help small producers and sellers. Avoiding the big market means avoiding green products or "green-washed" items (Wills 2009; Pollan 2001; Seidman 2007). C. Song, a consumer activist describes how:

A fairly long time elapsed since I last visited supermarkets, as almost all of my necessities are now procured from the consumers' cooperative. That's why products provided by the consumers' cooperative are eco-friendly at all times. They impose less impact on the environment and their consumption is surely helpful to producers (C. Song, consumer activist).

Z. Kim, another consumer activist, expounds on this point by noting that:

Whenever I participated in sales promotions, e.g. One-Plus-One, or bargain sales at supermarkets or discount stores, I felt happy because I felt as though I was a really economical housewife. But after joining iCOOP, I came to see these sorts of feelings more complicated because my purchasing was not actually cost saving. As such, I decided to direct the money I use to consume to more meaningful places. If I consumed at discount stores operated by large companies, profits generated all go to them, rather than to the laborers therein (Z.Kim, consumer activist)

In this sense, interview participants said that they are willing to overcome major hindrances such as somewhat expensive prices (A. Jo, Z. Kim), low performance (Z. Kim, G. Oh), and countervailing family preferences (C. Song, F. Lee) in identifying themselves as ethical consumers. Specifically, Z. Kim's response to the

low performance of detergent is very impressive in that she shows an attitude and consciousness of making sacrifices for environmental conservation:

I was so much in a state of ambivalence about using detergent or something like that. Synthetic detergent is heavily detrimental to water pollution, so I changed to a natural detergent, but my laundry got yellower and dirtier with more and more washings. In such cases, I occasionally immersed the laundry into chloride bleach to remove the discoloring. Now some eco-friendly detergents are commercialized with advanced technology that washes out dirt very well. I am happy such quality products are available (Z. Kim, consumer activist)

Interview participants' consistency and coherence of ethical consumption practice, rather than just one-off or temporary action, allows participants to experience the real meaning of 'ethical practice.' Mr. Oh, a core leader, also points out that repeated consumption of products with ethical values deliver the real meaning of 'ethical consumption' practice in every moment of one's life:

Whether we are talking about organic farming, safe foodstuffs, fair trade or something like that, almost accounts for the role of iCOOP our consumptive behaviors are concretely created on the basis of ethical consumption as defined above, and repeated consumption practice as such leads to change in consumers' mind set. (G. Oh, core leader)

F. Lee, a consumer activist adds that:

With regards to problems associated with the rights of laborers and the gap rich and poor, we do not consume foodstuffs supplied by large companies, but rather we procure them from several million of small- and medium-size companies. In other words, we are dealing with a great many producers from very diversified production sites, so we have to pay keen attention to them so that the benefits, if any, are evenly distributed to all activists. As a director having influence on policy making, I agree upon considerations to be made on such benefit sharing (F. Lee, consumer activist).

Even more, this effect is also appearing in general life, and not just in the consumption sector. Interview participants said that they naturally put these ethical values cultivated in iCOOP into practice throughout their life. Participants changed their lifestyle; they gave up taking their own car, reduced their level of consumption, and turned off unnecessary electricity. The changes they made to their lifestyle in general allowed participants to experience a new emotions, thoughts, and attitudes

toward their given life, and even in their personal and family relationships. C. Song puts it thusly:

Everybody knows that using a vacuum cleaner is very easy and comfortable. Once I changed my mind that sweeping with a broom might be sometimes better as a means of energy saving for the environment... my physical work, such as folding, felt more refreshing to me. Also, going to see a film or going to an amusement park are not seemingly beneficial to cementing the family relationship; rather, I occasionally prefer going out for a walk in a forest via a shuttle bus with my family members (C. Song, consumer activist).

What makes these interview participants do what they have done is that they clearly believe that by consuming ethically and living in the right way, they can survive in their environment, guarantee fair compensation of small local producers, and change an unjust society that has an unfair gap between the rich and the poor. All members participating in this study said that they are willing to make a commitment to change the world.

Another device, the monthly union dues for iCOOP, contributes to strengthening the continuity and coherence of ethical consumption of members. Once people entered into iCOOP as regular members, all members pay a one-time membership fee and monthly union dues. In particular, paying monthly union dues was very special policy introduced first in iCOOP. Through this device, every month participants decide whether they stay or leave iCOOP. This is closely related to their identity as ethical consumers. Should they maintain their identity as ethical consumers, they will follow the corresponding duties and rights and also make choices regarding whether they continue to live 'rightly.' This device enables interview participants to take a look at themselves and maintain their ethical practice and identity as ethical consumers continually and coherently. R. Oh explains that:

The monthly union dues makes each member of iCOOP think about the maintenance of his or her membership together with their identity... What is more important in this context is that, by paying for the monthly union dues, they are qualified as participatory owners with corresponding rights (R. Oh, core leader).

As discussed so far, the various devices across the dimensions enlist participants to be in an “ongoing movement under ties within everyday lives” (iCOOP 2008, 86), and to have an effect on institutional orders, market practice, or the affairs of the states through making changes in their own lives. In this sense, it is evidently said that all members regardless of the position in iCOOP, have social and political intent and willingness to influence society and the world through ethical consumption practices.

As shown so far, this sort of ‘reflexivity’ penetrates into all dimensions of a process of being ethical consumers in that it urges people to take individualized responsibility within a context of global negative social change by continuous remodification of their own consciousness and practice.

The ‘reflexive project of the self’ which Giddens (1991) introduced is “the process whereby self-identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives,” (244) and “the construction of the self as a reflexive project, [is] an elemental part of the reflexivity of modernity; an individual must find her or his identity amid the strategies and options provided by abstract systems” (124).

In order to understand the reflexive process of the self, it is very noteworthy to take a look at Giddens’ (1991) concept of modernity. Modernity, namely, post-traditional society that brings about rapid and extensive social changes such as “time-space disembedding” (Giddens, 1991:17), weakens the power of the absolute authority and orders overwhelming choices and options. This brings with it a growing awareness about risk and uncertainty, and these changes consequentially facilitate globalization and individualization (Giddens 1991; Connolly and Prothero 2008). In this context, Giddens characterized modern society as “the dialectical interplay of the local and the global” (1991:5), saying that “the day-to-day activities of an

individual today are globally consequential. My decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, for example, or a specific type of foodstuff, has manifold implications,” (Giddens, 1994: 57). Individuals’ decisions regarding how to live and how to conceptualize themselves have immense importance within “the settings of local-global interrelations” (Connolly and Prothero 2008, 141).

One’s consistent and coherent decisions toward a particular way of life in the context of multiple choices in the post-traditional society contribute to representing a lifestyle as “the assemblage of social practice” which is involved in reflexivity (Evans and Abrahamse 2009, 489; Giddens 1991).

This is the concept of life politics that Giddens (1991) suggests is a politics of lifestyles and life decisions based on reflexivity (214, 215). Within the "connections between lifestyle options and globalizing influences," Giddens (1991) calls upon individuals to "adopt new lifestyle patterns" in order to address ecological crises based on reflexivity (221). The items listed below represent the features of life politics that Giddens suggested in a comparison of emancipatory politics:

Life politics (Giddens 1991, 215)

1. Political decisions flowing from freedom of choice and generative power (power as transformative capacity)
2. The creation of morally justifiable forms of life that will promote self-actualization in the context of global interdependence
3. Develops ethics concerning the issue ‘how should we live?’ in a post-traditional order and against the backdrop of existential questions

In this view, all of the devices and the corresponding processes of being ethical consumers and participants in this study in all dimensions can be understood in the context of a representation of life politics based on reflexivity. Participants in this study show that they readjust their consuming patterns and choose their lifestyles based on a changed consciousness of self, the world, and the interrelations between both. Also, this is the result of their constant concerns about the right way of living

and how to live in the right way.

However, even if this form of ethical consumption is seen as life politics, it is an evident fact that this kind of political participation is different from the existing conventional forms of political participation. What we call the conventional political participation indicates those things that, “existing political institutions can effectively channel, that [which] does not advocate or promote political or social instability, and thus ... the political elite approves” (Barrington, Bosia, and Bruhn 2009, 324). This includes activities such as voting, attending a political meeting, joining in a political party, and writing letters to politicians. Namely, conventional forms of political participation should be based on political institutions and acceptance of dominant culture. In this view, ethical consumption as life politics does not apply to this definition of the conventional political participation; ethical consumption is a new arena to deliver social and political purpose through individual choice.

As Giddens indicates below, the institutional politics and the role of conventional political participation is still significant in realizing the value that is embedded in life politics:

all issues of life politics involve questions of rights and obligations, and the state thus far continues to be the main administrative locus within which these are settled in law....Attempts to extend and sustain citizenship rights, for example, remain fundamental; such rights provide the arenas within which life-political issues can be openly debated (Giddens 1991, 226).

Participants in this study also agree with the efficacy and importance of conventional political participation. Mr. Shin, a core leader, emphasizes the balance between individuals' roles as ethical consumers and citizens' roles that can influence collectively on society, noting that:

To modify or enact even a provision of law or administrative rule has a direct effect on the people, as you know. Despite that, we might be too much indulged into what we are pursuing, neglecting the significance in such a segment. Although admitting that the movement we are involving ourselves in is of paramount importance, it is also problematic for us not to pay attention to the larger frame of politics, in which

it can be argued that we are self-satisfied over the acquisition of a smaller one, while losing a bigger one. (O. Shin, core leader)

As indicated above, in addition to individual ethical consumption practices, this ‘collectized’ consumer power is very important in influencing social change. The participation of most general members is in line with Mr. Shin’s idea (B. Park, C. Song, E. Kim, J. Ju, F. Lee, G. Oh, Z. Kim). Ethical consumption practices that are scattered and individualized cannot respond effectively to global social and ecological crises, and thus in order to realize social and political value in terms of life politics, they should collect their scattered power. It is in line with the argument that the institutional structure and the system of society restrict individuals’ choices, practices, and lifestyle (Willis and Schor 2012; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005).

In this view, the following section will explore how ethical consumers as political agents of life politics can be connected to the collective activism and conventional political participation.

A Path from Ethical Consumption to Collective Activism, and by Extension, Conventional Political Participation

As examined so far, ethical consumption falls within the definition of political participation as life politics in that participants change their lifestyle and build up their identity based on a self-reflexive process at the individual level as a response to global and ecological risk. Upon reaching this realization, one must next come to an understanding as to the ways in which ethical consumption intersects and intertwines with those things already considered political participation, particularly vis-à-vis conventional collective participation. This section examines this question in terms of collective activism and conventional political participation and shows how

ethical consumers can be mobilized to collective activism and conventional participation.

Given the features of ethical consumption as individualized practice and unconventional participation even within one specific association such as iCOOP, it is very important to find links between individualized ethical consumption and political participation based on 'collectiveness' and 'institutionalization'. Here, collective activism refers to participation based on collectiveness (demonstrating, petitioning, striking, rioting, etc.), and conventional participation is defined as the use of the existing political channels (voting, joining a political party, lobbying, writing letters to politicians, etc.).

First, taking into account an awareness of the importance and collective power of consumers and conventional politics, core leaders first and foremost strive to offer an educational venue for general members to train themselves within the scope of political agency in the collective level. Various opportunities provided through devices such as seminars, town-gatherings, etc., enlist members to express their opinions and plan initiatives designed to accomplish practical goals. O. Shin, a core leader, describes how:

One of key characteristics in iCOOP is education for its members... directed at inducing them towards more proactive-ness in consumption and more understanding of problems facing the society, by ways of a variety of discussions, presentations and activities. I am confident that such endeavors if accumulated step by step will lead to vivid changes in the sphere of established systems. Although different in terms of individualistic thoughts and questioning about problems, why not make iCOOP an arena at which our endeavors are converged? (O. Shin, core leader).

In particular, there is a self-governing principle that requires that general members take charge of iCOOP, and not just its core leaders. Anyone belonging to the local communities within iCOOP as general members can participate in making policies for iCOOP and they also elect the head of iCOOP and the executives of the

local cooperatives. Among the heads of the locals, one is elected as the representative of iCOOP. Also, general members can be consumer activists if they have the willingness to devote their time and efforts, and then work in more professional levels as members of various specific committees such as the committee of training the public, for the food safety movement, or for monitoring produce. S. Jung, a core leader describes iCOOP's decision-making and leadership structure as follows:

Because small-scale units of iCOOP are entrusted with active decision-making powers internally under the board of directors, more diversified leaders are cultivated. When comparing a large-scale organization composed of one million constituents with 100 small-scale organizations composed of 10,000 members each, the number of directors for the latter is 100 times greater. I admit that directors for the former may be highly skillful in economic judgment, requiring high levels of expertise. As for the latter having a smaller organizational size, however, such expertise is not necessarily needed, where housewives have freer room for participation. It is because we lay much weight on the latter particularly as a means of training for democracy. (S. Jung, core leader)

Another aspect of importance associated with the educational committee is to instill in trainees a firm belief in functionality of iCOOP in a repetitive fashion, while rehabilitating a diluted mindset toward iCOOP activity. In such a manner, iCOOP contributes to local communities. (B. Park, consumer activist)

Through such devices, participants are able to be familiar with mobilizing and training themselves in communal agendas within iCOOP in a democratic way in a collective level. However, in fact, there is still a social atmosphere that emphasizes laying off talking openly about politics and a general fear of political participation due to the group's victim mentality within the rapid democratization in South Korea (Kim, 2010). Participants in this study also expressed their negative feeling about politics (J. Ju, D. Kim, and G. Oh). Nevertheless, through these experiences, participants said that participating in collective politics has not been as difficult as it used to be since entering into iCOOP.

By engaging in rehearsal phases for citizens' role in the collective level,

participants in reality become involved with a great deal of collective activism. The agenda is very extensive, and covers topics ranging from food safety, to national projects to places suffering from environment danger, to comfort women taken to Japanese rape camps during World War II, to the South Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement. In most instances, the collective applies unconventional participation methods such as signing, protesting in public spaces both individually and in groups, and contributing to a newspaper because these activisms were not through traditional political channels. Participants could see and access the specific agenda both online and in offline stores, town-gatherings, seminars, and iCOOP newspapers, and also easily indicate their opinions.

To understand the process of mobilizing members in iCOOP, one case, involving collective activism related to the ‘comfort women’ issue is examined, with particular reference to the 2011 annual report of iCOOP (2011, 13). ‘Comfort Women’ is a term used to describe Korean women forced by the Imperial Japanese government into sexual slavery during World War II. In order to get the Japanese government to take up its social responsibilities in this regard, iCOOP has pursued a four-step process, as described below:

**Solidarity Activities for Resolution of “Comfort Women” issue
(Collaborating Organization: the Korean Council)
(the annual report of iCOOP 2011, 13)**

1. Host two Wednesday Demonstrations in the first half of the year
2. Participate in 500,000 signatures campaign for legal resolution of “Comfort Women” issue
3. Participate in 100-Person Declaration for Legal Resolution of “Comfort Women” Issue
4. Provide supplies for 20th anniversary of the Korean Council/Sponsors Fair

Ms. Kim says that she sees this as a sign of her changing political behavior, because this issue has no direct relation to her personal interests.

It is not directly associated with consumption...but you know there is a demonstration every Wednesday protesting for compensation for the comfort

women. At this point I have a thought that our children need to be guided to pay attention to such values, rather than being selfishly raised. To hold a one-man protest was rare in the past. Why don't we talk about it with our children in such a manner that it is a sort of expressing belief of a picket holder who is courageous over an issue? (Z.Kim, consumer activist)

There is another case. Ms. Park, a consumer activist, remembered several instances related to food safety. For example, she discovered a danger with one of the tar color formulations used as a food additive, so members at iCOOP, in solidarity with other civil groups, gathered signatures on a petition asking the government to regulate strongly the use of the dangerous materials. As a result, the government has increased restrictions on the use of tar color formulations.

Most participants felt more familiar with collective activism through unconventional channels than with conventional participation. With respect to the character of unconventional and new political participation including ethical consumption, participants also thought that new forms of political participation were more accessible, easy to enter and exit, and utilized instant methods to indicate their voices. Moreover, this tendency might be attributed to the particular conditions that iCOOP provides, particularly regarding the fact that it pursues more ways of participating in unconventional activism. This arises in part because legal restrictions require consumer cooperatives to maintain political neutrality. That is, consumer cooperatives including iCOOP cannot as organizations directly present political opinions or support for a specific party or politicians. Also, given the structure and system of iCOOP, which is thoroughly self-governing, pursuing one specific value and direction would prove quite impossible because the list of consumer activists changes frequently, and these same people remain deeply involved with the policy and management of iCOOP. Namely, iCOOP does not incite members to undertake politics in a united and systematic manner, but rather seeks to provide information for

members so that they might develop a critical perspective that allows members to serve within their role as citizens in the collective level. Core leaders in this study emphasized the role of iCOOP as activating citizen consciousness in terms of politics.

In this sense, although there are not individual cases so much as collective nonconventional participation, political participation using conventional political channels is also an object of attention for members and core leaders. A notable example that participants remembered occurred during a vote on the decision whether free school lunches could be provided or not. While conducting interviews, the issue of free school lunches was a very big agenda item in Seoul, South Korea. In order to understand the context of the rejecting vote of members at iCOOP, this following article from *The World Street Journal* (2011, August 22) provides some background:

Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon, a member of the conservative Grand National Party that controls the Parliament and presidency, pushed for the referendum as a challenge to the city council's decision to expand a free-lunch program. The council, which is controlled by the opposition Democratic Party, earlier this year voted to provide free school lunches to all of Seoul's 850,000 elementary and middle-school students, at a cost of about \$378 million a year. Supporters of the free-lunches-for-all policy say it removes the stigma that recipients of free lunches face. Mr. Oh favors providing free lunches to students from households that earn less than 50% of the average national income, a plan estimated to cost \$280 million a year..... Currently, Seoul provides free lunches to all students from grades one through three, and to students in grades four and up based on income qualifications. The referendum is the first time Seoul voters will cast a ballot on an issue rather than on people running for office.....Mr. Oh said he would stake his mayorship on the results of Wednesday's vote There is a chance the vote will turn out to be technically invalid. Election rules say a third of the city's voters must participate for the results to have a binding effect on policy.

According to the interview, all participants recognized the political complexity behind this issue, and sought to reach a point of clarity and consensus by holding information and discussion session with other members through town gatherings, seminars, or the magazines published at iCOOP. They said that this welfare issue was closely related to disharmony between classes and the struggle between the conservative camp and the progressive camp.

In this context, most participants said that they chose not to participate in

voting in that they did not want to engage in an irrational political logic behind politics raised by the conservative Grand National Party and try to expand a free-lunch program. Participants said that they encouraged other members and ordinary people to reject the vote by signing, campaigning, and posting. For them, this issue would have a big influence on their everyday life directly. After all, participants experienced immediate benefits - free school lunches - from a change in policy due to the use of a conventional political channel, voting. One of the general members, A. Jo explains her view on things thusly:

In most cases voting is nullified if it fails to gain a majority. With respect to an issue that Mayor Oh, Se Hoon takes a calculated political risk in replacement of his office of mayor, we at iCOOP are taking an under-the-table action. I am also in the pro-nonvoting group. More specifically, iCOOP goes to the mat for a free-meal policy through the use of eco-friendly foodstuffs. If so, the quality of lunch for school children will be improved, irrespective of whether the school kids come from poor or rich homes. I am in favor of joining the nonvoting group to see if Mayor Oh is really resigned. (A. Jo, general member)

R. Oh adds to this point by noting that:

One of core activities made by iCOOP pertains to a policy for free meals, particularly toward the use of environment-friendly foodstuffs. As far as welfare related topics are concerned, there are issues of a few meal and college tuition cuts, where we are more interested in the former as it directly involves health of children. From the viewpoint of children, they reserve the right to enjoy healthy foodstuffs. In this regard, it is time to make the current Seoul mayor resign. In the case of Gyunggi-do Province, that failed to adopt the free-meal policy, parents of schoolchildren shall pay for their meals. (R. Oh, core leader)

Thus far, this section has demonstrated how ethical consumers are connected to collective activism and conventional political participation. The collective interest and power that comes about because of ethical consumption as life politics gets escalated into full-scale social and institutional agendas unrelated to their interest and consumption practice. What is important is that iCOOP provides a platform to collect and maintain the state of this collectivized consumer power by organizing individual consumers. It is not an 'imagined community' for mobilizing scattered consumers, but rather a practical and real community established by consumers themselves in which

consumers try to become aware of interrelations between the self and the world, rearrange their way of living, and further extend their interest and action into large-scale social and political issues in order to make social change. Ethical consumers in iCOOP demonstrate a commitment to taking responsibility for global and social issues at the dual levels of individual and collective contexts. The consumer activist G. Oh explains that:

It is not practicably possible for an individual in collaboration with others to change the world itself, not through a systematic organization. It could be theoretically imaginable for the world to be changed in one instance by collecting individuals who stop use of air conditioners or carry out ethical consumption, but not realistic in reality. In such a sense, iCOOP is assigned to assume great responsibilities as it is a systematic organization, capable of dispersing ideas more quickly and more broadly. (G.Oh, consumer activist)

Revealing the positive relationship between ethical consumption and collective activism and conventional political participation is noteworthy in the sense that “it cautions against zero-sum interpretations of ethical consumerism as a substitute for robust civic participation as a citizen” (Barnett et al 2005, 48).

Going further toward Social Change: Creating Alternative Systems

Participants in this study said that they recently began planning new initiatives in iCOOP. To this end, they sought to build up industrial corporation complex to provide organic, safe, affordable foods processed by local farmers and companies that belonged to iCOOP, while also seeking to secure stable production and income of producers and farmers. They call this an “eco-friendly food cluster.” Also, iCOOP Valley is also a part of this cluster, which offers the ecological environments for future residents such as “eco-friendly orchards, farms, ponds, gardens, a town, and schools as working and living quarters” (iCOOP 2011, 3). One of the core leaders, O. Shin lays this out, noting that:

There is a processing facility under construction in Gurye where companies processing organic farming foodstuffs plan to gather. Despite that, so many vendors, suppliers and outsourced companies of iCOOP are scattered over the nation. Another plan to construct such a type of complex will be put into practice at Goisan where about 40 agricultural processors are collected, whereas about 15 to 20 are scheduled in Gurye. The facility located in Gurye is about to commence construction of a main factory in December of this year as civil engineering works have now been completed. As for Goisan's, civil works will begin sooner or later scheduled to finish by the end of 2013. Around the time when partial buildings are about to be constructed, we will explore an idea to create ecological villages around those factories though the basic design plan thereof is not yet formulated. I am personally planning to move to Goisan around the second half of 2013 when construction is underway (O. Shin, core leader).

These initiatives enable consumers to free themselves from the existing social structure and the privileged class's control. This is the real base for consumer-citizens to realize their preferred proper way of living and to actualize their core values through creating alternative systems. Q. Shin asserts that:

It is possible there will be attacks by powers with vested interests targeted at us if our organizational scale grows up to be a formidable counterpart. To cope with such possibilities, we have to build a system so that our organizational and economic assets are distributed to a great extent in order for us not to get entangled with them or their vested interests. Just as one might make a detour when one line of a communications network or internet system is interrupted, we shall converge our energy on businesses or programs implemented by us, while letting our organization be more differentiated or fractionized. Even though some parts of our hierarchical organization are damaged, it cannot destroy the entire one. In such a fashion our organizational system shall be flexibly concretized, which means there is little room to grow up as a large-scale power having some vested interests, while allowing territorial iCOOP to be very freely operable by the movement part. If so, our organization cannot be controllable by any economic power (Q. Shin, core leader).

CONCLUSION

This thesis explored how ethical consumption falls within the category of political participation. It does so by using the concept of life politics as laid out by Giddens, and by examining the ways in which ethical individual consumers get mobilized towards collective activism and conventional political participation that influences social change in the context of globalization and individualism. The key point of intersection in this link between ethical individual consumption practice and conventional politics is the point at which ethical values and the frame of consumer

cooperatives meet.

Participants in iCOOP, a consumers' cooperative in South Korea, described what ethical consumption meant for them, the position that ethical consumption occupies in their social lives, how they adopt sustainable lifestyles, and how ethical consumption led to political participation in a more traditional sense. In alignment with their changed consciousness regarding ethical consumption, they came to care about other political and social issues intertwined with citizenship. In this sense, participants show their commitment to collective activism and conventional political participation. They acknowledged that there should be changes at both the level of life politics and conventional politics in order to bring about social change aimed at realizing social justice and addressing ecological risk. Connolly and Prothero (2008) also argue that, "clearly, the sense of personal responsibility for ecological reform evidently within our study appears to embody a normative political ideology, which positions each individual as responsible for ecological damage and reform (141)." To this end, the setting of consumer cooperatives under the banner of ethical consumption proves very effective in terms of connecting individual life politics and conventional politics.

This result not only supports the alternative views of ethical consumption as political participation, but also offers a very fresh perspective in that the results show the process and the mechanism of the connection between consumption and politics. However, most existing works on ethical consumption as political engagement tend to examine the political implications embedded in consumption itself. In this view, there can still be unsettled dilemmas of whether ethical consumption as new politics might substitute the old or not.

On the other hand, this study has implications in terms of how it attempts to

explore the function and influence of ethical consumption itself on the bridge to conventional politics, not focusing on citizen-consumers who might already be politically mature. In line with Giddens (1991)' focus on pursuing an understanding of the connection between life politics and emancipatory politics, this study describes why the balance of both is important and how the balance can be accomplished in our lives.

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